

Michelle Harven: [00:04](#) This is Force for Hire.

Desmon Farris: [00:05](#) A deep dive into private military contracting, and how it's transforming the battlefield.

Michelle Harven: [00:09](#) I'm Michelle Harven.

Desmon Farris: [00:10](#) And I'm Desmon Farris. For this episode, we'll be hearing from Erik Prince. He's a former US Navy SEAL, and founded the well-known company Blackwater. To hear more about their role in the War on Terror, listen to our previous episode.

Michelle Harven: [00:25](#) We wanted to have Erik on to discuss criticism over Blackwater's conduct during the Iraq War, and the public perception it's received. We'll also be talking about his proposal for Afghanistan, and another company he founded, Frontier Services Group, and more.

Michelle Harven: [00:43](#) All right. Well, Erik, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. I'm not sure how much you heard about the project that we're doing, so we wanted to give you the opportunity to respond a little bit. Why don't we start off with asking, do you think Blackwater receives unfair perception?

Erik Prince: [01:01](#) I would say Blackwater became the Kleenex of contractors in the Iraq War in terms of revenue, in terms of manpower. We were a tiny micro-percentage of the presence of contractors over there, but because we were the only one that was integrated with armed personnel, armored vehicles, helicopters, aircraft, all the rest, with a training facility unique of its kind back in the United States, and because we were taking on the highest risk high profile mission, it received attention far, far beyond its role.

Erik Prince: [01:47](#) I think the politics in the Vietnam War, the anti-war left went after the troops, and this time they went after contractors. They particularly like to complain about armed contractors.

Michelle Harven: [02:01](#) Do you think you were a bit of a scapegoat?

Erik Prince: [02:02](#) Whether it's a scapegoat, whether it's the tallest nail receives the most blows. So yeah. The attention paid to us because of our work for the intelligence community at the same time, it made all that attention swirl a bit more than necessary.

Michelle Harven: [02:23](#) You've been a very visible figure throughout all this as well. What about yourself? Do you believe that you receive unfair characterization?

Erik Prince: [02:33](#) I would say whether it's unfair or just ignorant characterization, a lot of people say things that they have no idea what they're talking about. Whether it's a mischaracterization of security contractors, or what they do, or the rules of engagement, I find it amazing how in one breath, people are loving veterans and they're praising them and they're giving them benefits, rightful benefits back in the States, but yet if that same veteran goes to work to use those skills that they gained in the military again, they love to demean them as a mercenary.

Desmon Farris: [03:13](#) I understand that you went from that to running a business, and that came with a bunch of extra stuff at a time where a lot of stuff wasn't necessarily clear.

Erik Prince: [03:24](#) Look, Blackwater came to be because Seal teams, those kind of units have been using private facilities since the 1970s, and no one had done it on an industrial scale, a large and comprehensive training facility, and when I got out of the Navy earlier than I had planned to, I was in a position to develop and to finance such a place. In 1996, there was not a lot of talk of a global War on Terror. It was actually quite the contrary. It was massive military draw-down. There was a major range facility being closed somewhere around the country on a weekly basis because a lot of the Cold War legacy bases were being closed.

Erik Prince: [04:16](#) That's when we started. After the coal was attacked and the Navy needed training for tens of thousands of its people, we were ready. When 9/11 happened and the US government needed that support overseas, we were ready. You go back to the same well that you're comfortable with, and I recruited other veterans that I served with to build Blackwater. We ended up employing thousands and thousands of contractors that had served their country once already well in a military or law enforcement capacity, and we let them reuse those skills again to serve their country.

Erik Prince: [04:54](#) Look, I think it's unfortunately most Americans, and certainly most talking heads, have zero appreciation of history or understanding of it. I think if you look back, I talk about it a lot in a chapter of the book I wrote, that battlefield contracting is literally as old or older than the country itself.

Erik Prince: [05:17](#) I think it's important for people to realize that America was not founded by the British Army, or even by the British government.

It was founded by for-profit companies, the Massachusetts, Jamestown, Plymouth colonies were companies that were listed on the London Stock Exchange, and they hired private military contractors to come and protect their colony. John Smith or Myles Standish were former professional soldiers that came over and worked in developing and securing that colony, and that's literally how the country was founded. The US Army itself grew from the original colonial militias that came up around those colonies, and they became the Minutemen, which became still-serving units of the US Army.

Erik Prince: [06:10](#) So look, it's as old as warfare. The role of contractors will ebb and flow. I would say the math and the facts will speak it out. You will see a much greater role of contractors used by successful countries that are trying to deal in overseas contingencies, or for their training or maintain or logistics requirements at home because the US is now coming off of 17 years, our longest war. Face it, folks, it's a fail. The Taliban still controls way more of Afghanistan than they should, and I fear that the US military is failing to learn lessons from Afghanistan like they failed to learn from Vietnam. The speed and flexibility that comes from using private sector capability is going to be used more and more around the world by other countries, and the United States will have to come to that realization as well.

Michelle Harven: [07:24](#) And that brings us, I think, kind of cleanly to your proposal for the Afghanistan War. Can you sort of explain that, go into that a bit?

Erik Prince: [07:31](#) Sure. Well again, let me start by saying that people mischaracterize it by saying it's a privatization of the effort, and that's really not the case at all. You have 15,000 US troops there now. You have 30,000 contractors. The US military requires an enormous amount of support, and a very, very heavy logistics footprint.

Erik Prince: [07:53](#) All I've advocated is a rationalization to allow a more unconventional support capability to keep the Afghan security forces upright, functioning, and able to defend themselves. I tried to address the 17 years where the US effort has gone awry, and the biggest thing is the lack of continuity.

Erik Prince: [08:22](#) We typically send a unit there for six to eight, maybe 10 or 12 months. Averages out to around eight months. The unit goes, and they spend a little time on the ground. They get to know an area. Most of the people in that unit have never been to that area before, but they get to know the area for the first couple of months. Then they're productive for a few months, and then

they spend the last couple of months getting ready to go home, do the inventory, a quick turnover, and you lift that entire unit up and you send it back to the United States, and you send a new unit, and then you start again.

Erik Prince: [08:56](#) We've gone through that rotation more than 30 times now. There is no continuity with the Afghan security forces. Not the multi-year capability that you could have. From a ground mentor perspective, I would put veterans, also known as contractors, and attach them to each Afghan battalion where they live with and actually live, not on a separate American base, live with the Afghans, train with them, patrol with them, and yes, fight alongside them and provide a skeletal support structure: leadership, intelligence, communications, medical, logistics expertise to make sure the unit is paid on time and fed on time and resupplied, that there's a fire support plan, that they can call air, they can call a medevac, and to make sure that those key enablers actually show up every time.

Erik Prince: [09:54](#) Remember, 100 or so [soft 00:09:57] and CIA officers working with Afghan militia men smashed the hell out of the Taliban in a matter of weeks after 9/11, and this is at the same time that the US military, again, then the most expensive military in the world, the best thing they offered President Bush in the days after the Pentagon was attacked was missile and bombing and a ranger raid, and they wanted to do a conventional invasion of Pakistan six months later, the following April. It was the agency's unconventional approach that ultimately very much carried the day.

Erik Prince: [10:40](#) If we go back to a small footprint, unconventional approach, you'll have significantly better effect. Because the one thing the US military does, any organization it tries to replicate itself wherever it goes. So we have the largest economy in the world with the most expensive military, all of which, those habits are being transferred structurally to the Afghan army, and we've created basically a large welfare dependency. Totally incapable of funding their own defense.

Erik Prince: [11:13](#) Going to a much smaller footprint with the mentors, and of course with some air power attached, and again, our model would be to use simple aircraft, mostly two-seaters so that any strike aircraft, there's going to be a professional pilot in the cockpit with an Afghan pilot. So any weapons release is always the sole decision of that Afghan service member. Not a contractor pulling the trigger, not a US military person, an Afghan.

Erik Prince: [11:46](#) The third part which you have to do is to make sure that these units are paid and fed and supplied. The US presence in Afghanistan now costs, last year was \$62 billion. \$ 5 billion of that was to actually pay for the Afghan security forces. \$57 billion paid for the US presence there. So if you leave the \$5 billion in place, scaling down the enormous and very expensive footprint of the US forces there, you get enormous savings.

Erik Prince: [12:21](#) But you have to at least make sure that \$5 billion that you're spending on the ANSF is better spent to reduce that corruption and make sure they get their fuel. Most of that corruption occurs in those logistics contracts for the fuel, for the food, for the ammunition that they're buying. So you put some logistics personnel in place to control the warehouses, to control the deliveries, and of course to get them better combat medicine. You are seven times as likely to die if you're an Afghan that's wounded. I think we kind of breach that trust of the Afghan soldiers because people will fight harder if they know someone's going to patch them up.

Erik Prince: [13:01](#) But for the poor Afghans sitting on a base, whether there's 30 of the or 100 of them, and they get surrounded by the Taliban. The Taliban rolls in with 300 people, and they lay siege. The guys, the Afghans on the base call for help, and nobody comes. No air support comes, no medevac, no resupply, no quick reaction force. Nothing. After two days or three days, they're either slaughtered or surrendered or they try to escape and they're slaughtered on the way out of there.

Erik Prince: [13:37](#) It is ugly, and sadly if you watch the news, it occurs on an almost weekly basis. It slowed down a little bit over the hard winter months because the tempo in Afghanistan always slows down in the hard winter months, but sadly I would predict, regardless of these so-called peace negotiations, after the May opium harvest, it will be game on again against the Afghan security forces, and they will be back to losing hundreds of people at a time as these bases get destroyed.

Erik Prince: [14:13](#) Look, I am in favor of not abandoning Afghanistan. If we do, if the United States does, I guarantee you will see helicopters having to lift off the rooftop of the US Embassy and evacuating people just like Saigon in 1975. Now, it's already bad enough that if you're a US person serving at the US Embassy and you fly into Kabul, you have to get on a helicopter to fly four kilometers from the airport to the embassy.

Erik Prince: [14:44](#) That's bad enough as it is, but I'm saying if the US draws down, the ANSF will collapse, and the Taliban will take over the

country again. They're not born again as moderate civilization-loving people. They will be every bit as ugly. Women's rights will suffer. It'll be a crime again for a woman to go to school. There'll be beatings, there'll be beheadings, there'll be pushing gay people off diving boards into empty pools. All the horrible things that the Taliban was doing in the 90s will be back within weeks of the collapse of the ANSF.

Erik Prince: [15:25](#) So my only recommendation is to keep a structural support in place so that they can fight and resupply and be compensated and be functioning to prevent the chaos that would come from a Taliban takeover.

Michelle Harven: [15:42](#) How would this proposal differ from the contracts that you had in Iraq? Did you take any lessons from that? How would you handle accountability differently?

Erik Prince: [15:54](#) Sure. This would be a very different contract. This should be an Afghan government contract with ...

Erik Prince: [16:00](#) ... contract. You know, if we really want to Afghanize the war, then give them the ability to hire the capacity they need. I mean, as large as the United States military is, I had 56 aircraft of our own, own company-owned aircraft flying in Afghanistan, supporting the US Military. So to not let the Afghans do something similar when they have those gaps, to me seems unusual. So this is not a security contract. Those mentors are not there to do security, they're not there to do bodyguard work, but they're there to live with, train with and yes, fight alongside their Afghan counterparts.

Erik Prince: [16:47](#) The closest thing I would say to that, I mean look, Blackwater was responsible for many years for building the Afghan Border Police, and in that case we ran thousands of Afghans through training. After training we would send mentors, okay? Blackwater personnel attached as mentors into the field with them to provide this kind of skeletal support. The mentor piece that I'm advocating now is a longer-term bigger version of that, but they're going to work for ultimately the Afghan Minister of Defense.

Erik Prince: [17:22](#) I think it's time for the very conventional Pentagon to move along in Afghanistan, because their cost structure and ultimately their results on the ground have not been what they need to be. I think the President was right to campaign against endless wars, and he's trying to find a way to bring the cost in blood and treasure to Americans down to a much more reasonable level. Currently spending more than the entire UK

defense budget, the United States does just in Afghanistan, is wrong.

Erik Prince: [18:02](#) Accountability, I would handle it. I actually worked through a structure, how to do this with a former General Counsel of the CIA. You could do a UCMJ accountability method for any of the contractors doing this kind of contract that I'm advocating, on the ground and air and the logistics folks, to basically have a cell of investigators, prosecutors, defense staff in Kabul to handle any charges of wrongdoing by one of those contractors.

Erik Prince: [18:42](#) I would advocate a mix of 60% American, 40% from the other NATO nations, but to hire them individually. They would not come as national units. They have to come as individual persons working for this effort to remove the dysfunctional patchwork of national policies that have followed all those units. You say one unit from this unit can't patrol at night. Another unit can't cross this river for certain reasons. They came with so many restrictions. There's lots of very capable individual soldiers and aviators from those countries. They would come and work for a company working for the Afghan government to perform this. So it is a different ... It would be a different kind of contract, but there's plenty of examples of that throughout history.

Erik Prince: [19:34](#) If you look back to 1940, when you had Japan had invaded China and they were bombing the hell out of their cities, and China, the nationalist government then wanted help. They came to America. Roosevelt would not, could not send US troops, but he actually signed a secret executive order, which today you would call a presidential finding, allowing army, navy and marine pilots to take leave of their services and go to work for a private company. It was called CAMCO, the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company based in Shanghai, and that unit became the Flying Tigers and performed very, very well against the Japanese.

Erik Prince: [20:20](#) Eventually that unit was absorbed back into the US Army Air Corps, but that's a perfect example of where this kind of concept worked before and why it should work again.

Desmon Farris: [20:31](#) You stated that you would have the individual contractors come in, not these big groups, but at the same time to keep your continuity of troops, what happens? You got a bunch of people like, "Hey, I don't want to be here anymore." Doesn't that mess with your continuity a bit?

Erik Prince: [20:48](#) Here's the thing. Just like a professional mariner or a roughneck that's working on an oil rig or the kind of people that I employ

working on a mine in Africa, okay, in the middle of nowhere, you put them on a rotation basis and they will commit for a multi-year contract. They're going to go in for 60 days or 90 days, and then home for 30. Back in. But they're rotating as individuals, not as a unit.

Erik Prince: [21:15](#) So you might have ... I advocate a 36-man mentor team. You probably have 50 people assigned to that mentor team that are constantly rotating back in to keep that fully staffed at 36 positions, and they have the same continuity with the same unit. And yeah, you have to do that with financial incentives because as a private organization you can't stop-loss somebody. You can't force them to do anything. It is the ultimate volunteer force.

Desmon Farris: [21:44](#) You're proposal, when you're talking about having one say contractor, along with the Afghan ... and helicopter. You say ultimately it comes down to the Afghan troops' decision to pull the trigger. Doesn't those choices or that time to make those decisions, allowing that lapse of time, inherently put people in more danger if they have to wait those extra seconds to make those decisions?

Erik Prince: [22:13](#) Well, I would say it doesn't cost those extra seconds because literally there's an Afghan sitting in the cockpit whether you're flying a strike aircraft, a helicopter, an ISR feed. Look, the point being you have an Afghan that's speaking in Dari or Pashto to his counterpart on the ground. You've beaconed all your ground forces as best as possible. I would say that the high level of encryption ...

Erik Prince: [22:49](#) One of the biggest problems you have now is that there are Afghan forces on the ground, and they can't get services from close air support aircraft because they don't have a JTAG with them. Well, there are simpler ways to beacon them and for them to communicate, so that they can communicate their presence and their need to the aircraft overhead. We would also fly with a very different paradigm. We don't need to have aircraft at 20,000 feet dropping a precision weapon because there's been precisely aircraft shot down over Afghanistan from missiles. So putting the close back, and close air support is essential. There's been 92 aircraft lost over Afghanistan. All of them helicopters from ground fire, DShKs, PKs, or RPGs. So having an Afghan that is used to flying the professional mentor pilot gives them the confidence to fly at night, on goggles.

Erik Prince: [23:49](#) It is a model that has worked elsewhere around the world. This would be a bigger application of it, yes, but this is the only kind

of model that makes sense. Although you said there may be a few seconds delay, try the few hours delay it takes when you're trying to get permission to drop a bomb ... To get permission from a lawyer sitting in an air conditioned cubicle back in Doha at a CENTCOM base, instead of allowing it to be made by the Afghan service member in the cockpit who's sitting next to a high-time professional military pilot who's guiding, advising and keeping the aircraft safe in flight.

Michelle Harven: [24:35](#) I wanted to ask you, you recognize that you have a public perception. Do you think your own reputation could hinder this proposal, or do you feel like the White House is open to this?

Erik Prince: [24:50](#) Look, if some lauded former general suddenly embraced this concept, I have no doubt that it would be more widely accepted by them or by the public if it was coming from a four-star general, but sadly the flag officer community has been completely mum on the issue of the failings of the US Military effort in Afghanistan.

Erik Prince: [25:14](#) I come at it ... Look, I got out of the navy as an O-3, and I've built a company that provided a lot of services, a lot of exactly these kind of services to the US government. So I know how it works; I know how much it should cost; I know what the Afghans need, okay? I've been paying attention to Afghanistan since 1998 when I funded a peace conference trying to bring the king back, King Zahir Shah back from exile, back to Kabul to make peace long before 9/11.

Erik Prince: [25:46](#) I don't know if some other contractor came up and advocated it, maybe it wouldn't be as credible. I don't know, but I had 56 aircraft that I owned and operated all over Afghanistan doing exactly this kind of mission. They weren't dropping bombs but they were doing everything else. So love it or hate the idea, this is the idea whose time is coming, because as the US draws down and inevitably the spending will be reduced, this is the only kind of solution that will keep the lights on and to keep the ANSF from being overrun.

Erik Prince: [26:23](#) I think when there's an election, I think the other Afghan leadership understands that there's a problem and they need a practical solution because they want to prevent their country from being overrun and ruled by the Taliban yet again. They lived through that nightmare once in the 90s, and they don't want to do that again.

Michelle Harven: [26:47](#) You're still connected with the Hong Kong-based Frontier Services Group. Is that right?

Erik Prince: [26:52](#) Yes. I am a small shareholder and a deputy chairman.

Michelle Harven: [26:58](#) So I see criticism that comes out is that people can tend to question where your loyalties lie. How do you respond to people saying that your global endeavors may not be in America's best interest?

Erik Prince: [27:11](#) Well, first of all that company would not be performing this kind of work in Afghanistan. That company does ... it delivers groceries, it provides medevac services, it provides the IP air charter and air ambulance work throughout Europe and Northern Africa. So we're not doing anything that is in any way contradictory to American interest or call it civilization's interest.

Erik Prince: [27:41](#) Despite the ... yet again, media misreporting, we're not doing any training of any Chinese security forces. The only training the company provides now is, I would call it individual terrorism avoidance training. How to not be taken prisoner, how to not be a victim of a terrorist incident if you're staying at a hotel. Those would be for people like Air China employees or Bank of China employees that get stationed in some various garden spots around the world.

Erik Prince: [28:11](#) So look, like I said before, a lot of people say a lot of things that they know very little about, but that company in no way contradicts the interest of American national security.

Michelle Harven: [28:26](#) Okay.

Michelle Harven: [28:26](#) So I wanted to just get your thoughts on what you think is the future of the industry, the future of contracting. Is that more like this Afghanistan proposal?

Erik Prince: [28:38](#) Well, let's look at what ... If you look at the history of call it battlefield contracting, and I think you will see the pendulum swing back in that direction quite far yet again because after 17 years and a trillion dollars, a very conventional and a very expensive US Military is pulling back in Afghanistan with at most a draw, and most would characterize it as a fail. You've spent billions of dollars in Somalia going on 20 years now. Still a fail. I mean, a totally basket case of a country. Libya continues to be a problem after it was destabilized by NATO.

Erik Prince: [29:29](#) So the role, the need for contractors to go in and secure infrastructure and to secure people so that you can create ... and look, all these places are not ultimately solved by a military

solution. It's solved by putting people back to work and creating an investor environment where people will risk money to invest, to ... You know, the goal is to make a profit there, whether it's farming or mining or energy or as a shopkeeper, or whatever it might be, you're not going to do that unless you have a secure enough environment. So the private sector, like it did in the founding of America, inevitably has a role in that.

Erik Prince: [30:11](#) What you're seeing the Russians doing with Wagner, right? They used a very unconventional asymmetric hybrid capability in Crimea, in the Donbass in Eastern Ukraine. They had a significant contractor presence. Have in Syria, in Sudan, in Libya, in the Central African Republic, in Mozambique. The Russians are again showing up with a lot of weapons systems and a lot of muscle, okay? They're using contractors in their way to project their national interest and pursue their foreign policy. So contractors, like in the past, will continue to be a significant option for the United States, especially as you see the US Military, budgetary-wise now, trying to return to addressing near peer nation state conventional capabilities.

Erik Prince: [31:18](#) That's one of the big problems in Afghanistan and Iraq for the last 18 years we have effectively been trying to mow the lawn with a Porsche. Think about it. You're using a \$100 million F-16 to fight, to fly around and to target two guys in a pickup truck, or two guys operating off of a \$500 motorcycle. There's no place for that. I mean, the US Air Force was flying F-15s, B-1s, F-22s. Completely inappropriate use of tax payer assets. Complete overkill when they literally could've bought propeller-

Erik Prince: [32:00](#) ... complete overkill when they literally could have bought propeller driven aircraft in 2003 and the savings alone would've saved many, many millions of blade hours on all these frontline aircrafts. So you can't tell me about the problems of US military readiness because we've been abusing the pool of assets that we have, really, from a lack of imagination from the military leadership the last 15, 17 years.

Desmon Farris: [32:33](#) And that's understood. There's a lot that's being investigated from Iraq and everything, that's [crosstalk 00:32:39]-

Erik Prince: [32:40](#) You know what? Here's the thing, all kinds of noise about investigations, all of those officers, okay? Every one of them that made the decision that says, "Hey, it's a great idea to use an aircraft carrier, and we're going to fly an F18 off the aircraft carrier all the way across Pakistan to be on station for a half an hour over Afghanistan, at what cost? And then fly that aircraft

all the way back to the carrier, all of those officers were still promoted. Okay?

Erik Prince: [33:07](#) Nobody's been held accountable for gross abuse of taxpayer resources. Zero. It's a cultural problem in the military that comes back to a disconnect between senior officers that make decisions largely divorced from economic realities, something that private businesses cannot do if they plan to stay in business.

Desmon Farris: [33:33](#) Yeah. Did you say Frontier Service Group that you're a part of with part of delivering groceries and stuff like that?

Erik Prince: [33:39](#) That's true. Yeah, we have a big trucking operation in Southern Africa, and we do all the transportation for the largest grocery store chain in South Africa all the way from there up through the Democratic Republic of Congo. And of course-

Desmon Farris: [33:55](#) But you guys are providing security though.

Erik Prince: [33:59](#) Armed security, no. They do some training for security managers for people that are going to be out at a mine sites, or at an energy, like an oil production field, that's it.

Desmon Farris: [34:11](#) Anybody doing a simple Google search and Google Frontier Service Group and I find you guys' actual webpage and it talks about security as your core business-

Erik Prince: [34:20](#) Sure. In that that case it's security management, right? Like I said, there's no armed FSG employees, and so if you're providing security, you do the security management of a local security company. If you're in Mozambique, there's going to be Mozambique nationals that are armed and trained up to a standard and managed. That is the kind of security I'm talking about.

Desmon Farris: [34:43](#) But that's outside of China, correct?

Erik Prince: [34:45](#) Oh, correct. That is-

Desmon Farris: [34:47](#) Okay.

Erik Prince: [34:47](#) Nothing [crosstalk 00:02:48].

Desmon Farris: [34:49](#) Frontier Service Group isn't just operating in China, but they are also operating outside.

Erik Prince: [34:54](#) No, no, no. It is a Hong Kong listed company, kay? It has an office in Beijing. There is a school that the company is a minority shareholder of, only 25%, where it conducts classes for airline employees, bank employees, those kinds of people that are going outside of China that are at, because they're going to a place that's at risk of terrorism, where they are trained to avoid that terrorist incidence. Okay? So that's the only training done inside of China.

Erik Prince: [35:26](#) And the work that the company does is all outside of China. It is, like I said, aviation, trucking, warehousing, transportation, packaging, Medevac. We're the biggest providers of Medevac services for the UN all over Africa. If you get hurt in Somalia, it's pretty good chance that we're going to come and get you.

Desmon Farris: [35:48](#) So is there a way that you guys can display this information so more people can actually understand what you're doing in a better way?

Erik Prince: [35:56](#) Well, it's a public company, and so people that are welcome to read all the public disclosures. 'Cause every business the company is in is publicly listed as part of the Hong Kong stock exchange listing rules. So it is the most transparent and actually is published in English, it's not just in Cantonese or Mandarin. All those filings are done in English so people should actually just read instead of running their mouths.

Desmon Farris: [36:21](#) Right. I think I'm just asking because you can assume anything without doing research. But the company's based in China, which you're a part of, and then they see you advocating for new plans here in the United States. So I'm just trying to see is there a way that we can make it easier so people can understand better?

Erik Prince: [36:42](#) Well, look, everything I've advocated about Afghanistan would be done through a US entity. So look, I come to the Afghan policy aspect as an American military veteran and contractor who has done all the kind of things that are described as needs to be done. As to what Frontier Service Group is doing, there is, again, plenty of public disclosures and sadly, just like Blackwater became clickbait for a lot of that and my name has as well, people need to read past the headlines and realize that that people that write stuff on the Internet are largely doing it for attention and sadly are mostly divorced from reality.

Desmon Farris: [37:34](#) So basically saying is that Frontier Service Group is one part of something you're part of, and then what you're advocating for

in Afghanistan is something else and they're completely separate.

Erik Prince: [37:44](#) Correct, that is correct.

Michelle Harven: [37:46](#) And if we were to look at sort of the future of the industry, why did you go to China? Why is China sort of a hotspot for contracting?

Erik Prince: [37:54](#) Well, it's not a hot spot for contracting at all. Look, I sold Blackwater in 2010, I moved to the UAE because of Somalia piracy, and gave some ideas on a program to end Somalia piracy, and it worked. You don't really hear about Somalia piracy anymore, do you? And while the guys were out there doing that, I looked a lot more closely at energy development and mining in the hard to reach and hard to operate in places. And so I started a private equity fund, which takes investor money, invest in various projects, you build a business and you sell it at the right time. And while there, look, China has 1.4 billion people, and they've been growing at a significant rate really since the late '70s when they started opening up their economy and investing, and in doing, I would say, more capitalist based investing.

Erik Prince: [39:04](#) And China imports 90% of their energy. So they need to go out and find more sources of energy. You can imagine building houses for 1.4 billion people takes a lot of rebar, it takes a lot of cement, it takes a lot of copper wire, it takes all those minerals, and so China has a huge requirement for that kind of resource investing. And so some investors from Hong Kong said, "Hey come and help us build Frontier Service Group as a logistics provider to help make sure these mining projects, energy projects stay on track and support them." So that's been the goal of Frontier Service Group

Desmon Farris: [39:56](#) Because I think you've been on the forefront of this for awhile. Private sector contracting is accepted in a lot of different DOD and in the United States government. Why do you think this side of it gets so much grief or attention? Why do you think that it's being more applauded in other realms than not in this realm?

Erik Prince: [40:15](#) Well, look, what I'm advocating in Afghanistan is a, I would say, a more wholesome, fulsome model. 'Cause it's not just a matter of doing aircraft maintenance, or base support, or catering. I'm talking about putting thousands of professional veterans in the field again, and they're going to carry a weapon and they're

going to guide and lead, and when necessary, fight alongside their Afghan counterparts.

Erik Prince: [40:48](#) And the same on the aircraft side, they going to fly, not just fly surveillance missions. They're going to fly, resupply, in-combat medevac, and yes, even attack missions flying with and an attached to their host government exactly the same way the Flying Tigers did. I would encourage your listeners to go get a ... There's been some good books written on the Flying Tigers lately. Read about that model and it's exactly what I'm talking about doing again.

Desmon Farris: [41:17](#) I know it's a push that you're like, "Hey, let's give veterans some more employment opportunities." But what are you doing to advocate for maybe set necessary health benefits for this to assist that to happen?

Erik Prince: [41:33](#) Well if this program happened, right? So anybody that goes abroad on behalf of the US government, if they're paid by the US governments, are covered under Defense Base Act Insurance, which originally came from the 1930's when you had merchant marine sailors sailing supply ships across the Atlantic, getting torpedoed by Nazi submarines. So that law and that mechanism of insurance has been in place ever since then. Now if this is funded by the Afghan government, that would be a different model. If this is funded by the US government going to the Afghan government, whether you use a DBA model or whether we use another insurance model, trust me, anybody that endeavors to do this kind of support program for the Afghan security forces is going to have to have a comprehensive insurance benefit management program because sadly, and inevitably, guys will get hurt doing this mission. It's a dangerous mission, but there are a lot of professionals out there who are good at it, who like doing it and will go do that for a few years. And I've been approached by so many Afghan veterans that say, "Eric, please keep me on the list, 'cause if you do this, I want to come and help. I want to see this done right." For my own peace of mind, having spent the time they did in Afghanistan, and the losses they saw, they don't want to see it go to shit. And for the time and the sacrifice that they put in their lives, they want to see it end well and not the way it's headed right now. So anybody that's going to do this of course, is going to have obviously, great combat medicine in place to support the mentors, the contractors that are there, and of course, the Afghan forces that are there. And then a longterm disability if for guys that are injured doing the mission.

Desmon Farris: [43:31](#) Now are you guys going to put any plans in place?

Erik Prince: [43:34](#) Sorry, what do I do for US veterans now? Every year we host a bunch of a banged up US military veterans at my family's place in Wyoming. And it's always a humbling experience and a real education, and I am reminded that the thing that I think most veterans, especially wounded veterans need to feel whole is to be part of a team again and to be part of a mission. And I think it is a great danger, as fast as medicines are thrown at wounded veterans, it's sometimes the easy button for the bureaucracy to push more medicines on 'em. And instead if you find more, more great jobs for veterans in whatever capacity they can perform at, is a very healthy thing for them mentally, socially and with their families. And so yeah, I still employ ... The first calls I make if we have another job that emerges is to call the large veteran community that I know.

Michelle Harven: [44:59](#) And so I just wanted to ask one last question. So you've been under scrutiny for awhile, what keeps you going in this industry? What motivates you to stay in it?

Erik Prince: [45:12](#) Well, what I have between my wife and I, we have a lot of sons, and a couple of them are going to serve when they get out of college, I think. And I wrote an op-ed while I was at ... I guess the host started this Afghan discussion about a different way. I wrote it in the Wall Street Journal in May of 2017 because the idea of my son going to Afghanistan to get blown up or dead after what I would say is a very, very poorly run effort after 17 years, I wanted no part of. So I tried to provide the President a different paradigm to pursue, like any concerned parent doesn't want to see their kids life or limb wasted. Look, I love the US military. I'm not the lightest weight guy. I could run triathlons faster if I weighed 20 pounds less. The US military could use a very good diet. And having unlimited calories thrown at it over the last 17 years has created a lot of bad habits, and a lot of, I would say, self-destructive habits. And so helping the military slim down and become more effective will A, serve it's main deterrent's purpose in preventing war for the United States, and B, would do a better job of serving it's service members and letting them be very successful at their mission when they're called to do it.

Desmon Farris: [46:54](#) Thank you for taking the time to speak with us and give us your perspective of what's going on and what you're trying to do.

Erik Prince: [47:02](#) Well, thanks for having me. Have a good day, have a good weekend.

Michelle Harven: [47:05](#) All right, Eric, thanks so much.

Erik Prince: [47:07](#) Thank you.

Desmon Farris: [47:07](#) Yeah, cheers.

Erik Prince: [47:10](#) Thanks to Eric Prince for taking time to talk with us.

Michelle Harven: [47:12](#) And join us next time. We'll be talking about money, the contracts, the budgets and the \$60 billion of waste and fraud.

Desmon Farris: [47:21](#) And let us know your thoughts at [podcast@stripes.com](mailto:podcast@stripes.com), or find us on Twitter [@starsandstripes](#). Also, if you haven't done so, don't forget to subscribe, and while you're there, leave us a review.

Michelle Harven: [47:32](#) Force for Hire's Supervising editors are Bob Reid and Terry Leonard. Digital Team Lead and Editor is Michael Darnell.

Desmon Farris: [47:40](#) Thanks for listening.

Speaker 1: [47:42](#) This is Force for Hire.